

## ENGAGING OCEANIA

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*Captain Sea Sovereign Thomas, U.S. Marine Corps*

**T**he fourteen island nations of Oceania are weak by any traditional measure of state power. They are mostly small and poor, with zero military muscle and little diplomatic clout. On a map of the Pacific these microstates appear almost like tossed sand, widely dispersed and hardly noticeable in the great blue expanse between the Western Hemisphere, Asia, and Australia. But the small size and gross domestic products of these states conceal a disproportionate economic, political, and military potential. As a consequence, this region has received considerable attention from Beijing over the past decade as it moves to expand its influence in far-flung capitals around the world. China now has more diplomats in Oceania than does any other nation, its bilateral aid is expanding rapidly, and its trade with the region is two to three times larger than that of the United States.<sup>1</sup> While growing competition for influence is not necessarily a zero-sum game, neither is it risk free. Washington cannot afford to neglect its long-standing links with these saltwater states and should better employ the U.S. Pacific Command (USPACOM)—its principal lever of military and diplomatic power in the Pacific—by elevating the region’s importance and making current “theater security cooperation” more robust.

Oceania deserves Washington’s increased attention for three reasons. First, its

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marine resources in fish are tremendous at a time when global stocks are on the brink of collapse. Further, it is home to some of the world’s most vibrant and healthy coral reefs, invaluable in both economic and ecological terms. Second, the states of Oceania represent a sizable bloc of nations whose collective

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diplomatic weight is considerable. Maintaining strong American influence in the region, especially as Beijing moves assertively to establish itself as a new source of influence, will help to enhance regional support for Washington's foreign policy agenda. Third, the islands of Oceania straddle the geopolitically significant maritime routes between the United States, Australia, New Zealand, East Asia, and Guam, where America is significantly expanding its military presence. In the event of any large-scale U.S. military action in the western Pacific (over Taiwan, for instance), these islands could become logistically crucial.

### ECONOMIC AND ECOLOGICAL VALUE: FISH

The world is facing a crisis in global fish supply. Fish stocks have collapsed in nearly one-third of open-sea fisheries (that is, they have declined to less than 10 percent of their original yield), 25 percent of the world's marine fish stocks are overexploited (depleting faster than they are recovering), and an additional 50 percent are fully exploited (depleting at the pace of recovery).<sup>2</sup> As stocks become further exhausted, competition for access to fish and other seafood will become increasingly intense.

The Pacific Ocean is home to three of the four most productive fishing areas of the world, with the northwest Pacific being the most abundant and the western central Pacific—where Oceania lies—the fourth.<sup>3</sup> This maritime space is also the planet's most important tuna fishing area, producing about one-third of the global total.<sup>4</sup> These considerable resources are contained in island states' exclusive economic zones (EEZs), which stretch two hundred nautical miles from the coastline and wherein nations enjoy jurisdiction over the water column and all seabed and subsoil resources. The microstates of Oceania, many of which include sprawling chains of atolls, control vast swaths of saltwater territory out of all proportion to their tiny landmasses. For example, the Republic of Kiribati—half the size of Rhode Island (the smallest American state)—has an EEZ more than five times the size of Texas and eight times the size of California. In total, the fourteen nations of the region have rights to twenty million square kilometers of sea, more than twice the size of the continental United States (see map).<sup>5</sup> Washington's economic interests in maintaining access to these marine resources are complemented by strong ecological ones: not only is there value in supporting conservation regimes that protect fish and coral reefs from overexploitation, but there are scientific and purely environmental reasons for preserving Oceania's exceptional saltwater ecosystems. Consider the fact that President George W. Bush created the world's largest marine sanctuaries—three protected areas totaling five hundred thousand square kilometers—in the very heart of the region's saltwater expanse.<sup>6</sup>

## PACIFIC ISLAND NATION EEZs



EEZ data obtained from "SOPAC Mapserver," *Pacific Islands Applied Geoscience Commission*, [www.sopac.org/tiki-map.php?mapfile=pacific.map](http://www.sopac.org/tiki-map.php?mapfile=pacific.map). Map produced from Google Earth.

## POLITICAL VALUE: VOTES

Despite wide geographic distribution and diversity in forms of government, the nations of Oceania have broadly similar domestic concerns and foreign-policy goals. Domestically, nearly all island states confront poverty, lack of sustainable economic development, ineffective government institutions, corruption, and increasingly, transnational crime. Regionally, natural disasters, including cyclones, droughts, tsunamis, and rising sea levels associated with climate change, are significant challenges; further, poaching of marine resources—illegal, unregulated, and unreported (IUU) fishing—is a

growing problem faced by all island countries.<sup>7</sup>

Largely because of these shared challenges, a lack of local military competition, and a common maritime experience, there is great concert among the fourteen states of Oceania. This relative unity has spawned a considerable level of cooperation, resulting in the conclusion of several multiparty treaties (e.g., the South Pacific Tuna Treaty) and the development of healthy regional institutions, principally the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC) and the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF). These long-standing international organizations (the SPC was established in 1947 and the PIF in 1971) have expansive mandates in the fields of economic growth and integration, good governance, and security, and in turn they oversee numerous suborganizations (the PIF administers eleven) that collaborate on concerns ranging from fishing and tourism to power utilities management and environmental policy. The issues of common interest are numerous, and the vigorous governmental links that crisscross Oceania are illustrative of a surprising level of regional integration. In fact, the region's economic agenda is so closely aligned that Oceania's states are currently entertaining the adoption of a common market.<sup>8</sup>

Because of their close association and shared interests, these nations represent a sort of "maritime bloc" likely to vote along similar lines in international forums like the United Nations. Smart American diplomacy can translate this regional diplomatic potential into broad support for U.S. positions in places like the World Trade Organization, the International Labor Organization, and the

Asian Development Bank (ADB), where Pacific island votes are highly significant. (Consider the fact that Oceania, if viewed collectively, ranks ninth of sixty-seven nations in total votes in the ADB, with 75 percent of the voting power of China or India.)<sup>9</sup> Oceania's states also occupy a position of considerable collective weight within the various governance mechanisms of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which appears increasingly likely for near-term U.S. ratification.<sup>10</sup> Besides constituting nearly 10 percent of signatory members, these countries often furnish critical leadership; for example, the first secretary general of the International Seabed Authority, one of the three subsidiary bodies of UNCLOS, was a Fijian who held the post for twelve years, from 1996 to 2008.<sup>11</sup> Given the Obama administration's renewed emphasis on diplomacy and multilateralism, the search for votes and influence in international organizations is likely to receive greater emphasis. Because of the close alignment of its governments, "winning" all fourteen of Oceania's votes is a far easier task than, say, the twelve votes of South America, a region where amity is far less common.

#### MILITARY VALUE: ISLAND HOPPING REDUX?

With the impending move of U.S. Marines from Okinawa to Guam—the emerging geographic linchpin of American strategy in the western Pacific—Oceania's importance grows greatly. Its sprawling island states are far closer to Guam than Okinawa is (by more than 1,200 nautical miles, the maritime distance from San Diego to Seattle), and bisect the sea lines of communication (SLOCs) between the United States and its allies Australia and New Zealand. In the event of a major conflagration in East Asian waters, perhaps involving Taiwan and the People's Republic of China (PRC), American SLOCs would pass through Oceania. Given Beijing's strategic aim of expanding its naval defensive boundaries well beyond local waters and into the Marianas and Micronesia (the Chinese operating constructs known as the first and second "island chains") and its focus on developing anti-aircraft carrier capabilities through land-based missiles and submarines, it is clear that Chinese leaders plan to contest the maritime commons in the future, if push comes to shove.<sup>12</sup>

If the risks to carrier operations around Taiwan became too great, American military commanders would likely be compelled to fall back and disperse their forces on China's maritime periphery rather than in concentrations that could be easily targeted. As U.S. forces "phased" into the theater, building a critical mass along China's southern flank, the islands of Oceania could provide a significant logistical function as forces "hopped" into the western Pacific, evoking memories of American experiences in World War II. The region's runways and ports, not to mention its diplomatic support, would be of tremendous value.

In the broader strategic context, Oceania provides the United States with geographic alternatives as Washington reorients its East Asian military posture, moving troops from Japanese (Okinawa) to American soil (Guam) and reducing its force structure in Korea. The ability to operate from Oceania's sea and airports could simultaneously afford strategic depth and allow the United States to remain centrally positioned within Asian geopolitics—being operationally near allies without aggravating Japanese or Korean domestic affairs.

### CHINA'S INTERESTS IN THE REGION

Beijing's principal interests in the region are not military but political and economic. It is primarily concerned with reversing diplomatic recognition of Taiwan; the Pacific remains one of the last critical diplomatic battlegrounds between the two Chinas. Only twenty-three states worldwide recognize the government in Taipei, and six of them are in Oceania—Kiribati, the Marshall Islands, Nauru, Palau, the Solomon Islands, and Tuvalu. This grouping represents the world's second-largest regional cluster of diplomatic recognition for Taiwan, and Beijing is intent upon chipping away at this support for what it considers a breakaway province.<sup>13</sup> Offering carrots and sticks, China has rapidly increased its economic aid to nations that recognize Beijing exclusively, giving a regional total of \$300 million in 2007 (a ninefold increase over the preceding three years).<sup>14</sup> At the same time, nations that have switched their allegiance to Taipei have seen their economic assistance drop to zero and their Chinese embassies shuttered.

Beijing's secondary interests in Oceania are in access to natural resources like fish, timber, and minerals (prospective seabed mineral resources are also a long-term consideration). China is the world's largest producer and exporter of fish and is eager to have greater access to the region's gargantuan EEZs. It has fishing fleets permanently based in the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) and Fiji, and it guarantees continued access by funding large-scale industry-related projects. (Examples are fish-processing plants in Vanuatu, the Cook Islands, and Papua New Guinea [PNG] and the construction of the regional Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission headquarters in the FSM.) Beijing has also invested substantially in the few nations with territorial resources, importing significant quantities of timber from the Solomon Islands and PNG and investing heavily in the latter's mineral sector—notably, funding the \$651 million Ramu nickel and cobalt mine in 2006.<sup>15</sup>

Chinese trade with the region has multiplied appreciably, from \$743 million in 2006 (by comparison, U.S. trade was \$393 million) to approximately \$2 billion in 2007, with a stated goal of \$3 billion in total trade by 2010.<sup>16</sup> As aid and trade increase, Beijing seeks to build an alternative source of influence in the

Pacific—a region where governments are weary of being treated by donors as irresponsible, immature, and crooked. The PRC offers a new, attractive paradigm by granting aid, preferential loans, and tariff reductions without preconditions, all the while treating Pacific governments with respect, evinced by senior-level official visits, which have included trips by the foreign minister and premier, Wen Jiabao.<sup>17</sup>

## ENGAGING SALTWATER STATES

While Beijing's economic presence in Oceania may be on the ascent, it is not necessarily at the expense of American political influence. The United States has strong and enduring ties with the nations of Oceania built on a long history of economic and diplomatic engagement, and despite the PRC's increased activity, America-friendly Australia remains the dominant power in the region. Still, while competition in this increasingly important maritime area is not inevitably zero-sum, neither is it free of consequences. To hedge against rising Chinese influence, and because of the region's growing economic, political, and military potential, it is in Washington's strategic interest to enhance its relationship with Oceania. USPACOM is best poised to strengthen American ties by augmenting current theater security cooperation.

The depth and breadth of USPACOM's Theater Security Cooperation Plan (TSCP) for its entire area of responsibility—a plan that includes at least five or six annual military exercises, frequent senior official visits and exchanges, millions of dollars' worth of humanitarian and civic assistance activities, a myriad of multinational security and health-related training conferences, and the subsidization of dozens of international students at various American military educational institutions—make it the “Cadillac” of the regional combatant commands.<sup>18</sup> With respect to Oceania, humanitarian assistance is the TSCP's major area of focus. The annual naval PACIFIC PARTNERSHIP Program, born out of international cooperation following the 2004 Asian tsunami, has provided medical, dental, veterinarian, educational, and engineering support to seven of the nations of Oceania since 2007.<sup>19</sup> This and other assistance programs have been received extremely well in the region and considered highly successful.

Outside of these vigorous humanitarian efforts, however, the TSCP is rather thin as it affects Oceania. There are certainly elements that deserve continuation. For example, island states are well represented at USPACOM's regularly sponsored security seminars and health workshops and in programs to support international collaboration, like the Multinational Planning Augmentation Team. Further, Pacific military officers and officials are regular students at the Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies in Hawaii, and a handful have attended the Naval War College, in Newport, Rhode Island (four of fourteen states have

been represented there—Fiji, PNG, Samoa, and Tonga).<sup>20</sup> What the TSCP lacks for Oceania is a set of specific initiatives that treat the region as a distinct entity, aim to build upon its shared maritime identity, and address systemic problems in island government capacity.

The first order of business is to develop a regional multilateral exercise. USPACOM sponsors at least sixteen major international military exercises with relative frequency, including notables like COBRA GOLD and RIMPAC and bilateral exercises like GARUDA SHIELD (United States–Indonesia).<sup>21</sup> None of them, however, incorporate any of Oceania’s nations.<sup>22</sup> An annual Pacific-island security exercise focused on disaster response and involving government institutions, police, military forces, and nongovernmental organizations could assist states in building capacity, improving intra- and intergovernmental communications, and enhancing interoperability (especially with the United States). Branded, perhaps, “PACIFIC NAVIGATOR,” to resonate with island peoples who are immensely proud of their maritime histories, this exercise could be organized and executed under the leadership of Pacific Command’s Center for Excellence in Disaster Management and Humanitarian Assistance, an organization with experience in facilitating such drills.<sup>23</sup> The South Pacific tsunami of September 2009, which killed nearly two hundred, displaced thousands, and resulted in millions of dollars’ worth of damage in Samoa, American Samoa, and Tonga, could provide a ready case study in disaster response and mitigation.

Second, in anticipation of PACIFIC NAVIGATOR, USPACOM would conduct a focused infrastructure upgrade for one airfield or port within the prospective host nation (which would rotate annually). The improvement would be more than cosmetic but far less than a major overhaul (e.g., upgrading of maintenance facilities, radar, pierside storage, and the like). During the annual exercise, this improved facility would be a focal point. The infrastructure enhancement program would improve the host nation’s ability to conduct its own disaster-response operations and to receive international support in the form of supplies and relief workers delivered by aircraft and ship. The second-order benefits would include an improved facility better able to support a range of host nation missions—counternarcotics, rescue, monitoring of illegal fishing, etc.; positive local publicity for American forces; improved diplomatic relations commensurate with direct monetary assistance; and an airfield or port better able to receive U.S. military forces in the event of a contingency.

Finally, USPACOM should reshape its military exchange program for the region’s security officers. Only three of Oceania’s states have regular military forces, and as a consequence, many traditional military and naval roles fall to police units, including maritime functions associated with homeland defense.<sup>24</sup> In order to improve island states’ ability to conduct these missions, especially those



that are likely to become more frequent and difficult (the monitoring and prevention of IUU fishing, for instance), Oceania's police and naval personnel need to train with the best, the U.S. Coast Guard. While an "exchange" program as such would be inappropriate, due to the limited opportunities and platforms available among Pacific-island defense forces, a robust training program placing Oceania's security personnel on Coast Guard vessels could be highly effective. The aim would be to expose a pair (one midgrade officer, one junior officer/senior enlisted) to a Coast Guard ship or sector for a period of three to four months. Ideally, two pairs from different nations could be assigned to the same command, reinforcing regional confidence building and encouraging future collaboration. These exchange personnel would be placed with ships conducting a range of missions (perhaps focusing on the disruption of IUU fishing), all the while being exposed to the professionalism of the men and women of the U.S. Coast Guard.

Of course, any American initiatives in Oceania that fail to leverage the resources and influence of Washington's Pacific allies would be badly flawed. Australia and New Zealand, two of America's strongest partners, are also the two most influential nations in the neighborhood—trading in the highest volumes, contributing the most aid and government support to Oceania, and in some cases providing for the defense of island states. (For example, Australia provides for the defense of Nauru and New Zealand for the Cook Islands, Niue, and Samoa; Kiribati is a shared responsibility.)<sup>25</sup> In addition to their sheer presence in the region, Canberra and Wellington have long histories of military engagement with, and involvement in, island nations, most recently demonstrated by the Australian-led multinational peacekeeping operation in the Solomon Islands, which included troops from New Zealand, PNG, and Tonga.<sup>26</sup> Other allies too wield considerable influence in the Pacific as a consequence of their colonial histories (particularly France) or current economic relationships (Japan and South Korea, for instance). American policy makers would be wise to consider an engagement strategy that incorporates the unique strengths of these partners as well as their nuanced understandings of regional relationships, grounded in their long involvement in the Pacific.

## REBUILDING BRIDGES

Preoccupied with counterterrorism and democracy building in the Middle East, the United States has allowed its relationship with Oceania to wither while Beijing has expanded its strategic aims and efforts in the region. As Chinese trade and aid have skyrocketed, the United States has disengaged, closing its U.S. Agency for International Development regional office, halving the number of Peace Corps missions, and eliminating its U.S. Information Agency presence in

Oceania.<sup>27</sup> It is time to renew America's relationship with this strategically crucial maritime area. By building on current successful initiatives, U.S. Pacific Command is well placed to strengthen links with and between island governments, enhance regional capacity to manage future security challenges, and, in turn, restore American influence in a region with tremendous economic, political, and military value.

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